SEX AND SOCIALISM: THE OPPOSITION OF THE FRENCH LEFT TO BIRTH CONTROL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In the last decades of the nineteenth century the birth rate fell throughout western Europe. In France the decline, which began almost a hundred years earlier, proceeded at an unparalleled pace, plummeting from 34.8 births per 1000 in 1800 to 22.0 per 1000 in 1900.[1] Family planning on so wide a scale could not escape the attention of any serious student of social change, yet at the beginning of this century Georges Sorel noted that there was no problem that socialists had treated so superficially.[2] A rapid perusal of the works of the leading nineteenth-century writers of the French left provides abundant evidence that their discussion of population pressures was not only rudimentary, it was many times confused and eccentric. In what follows I sketch out the general lines of their treatment of the population question and offer some explanations as to why they failed to come to grips with the issue of birth control. In isolating one problem new light will be cast on several of the broader traditions of the French left: its views on women, on the family, on pleasure—especially sexual pleasure—as a measure of happiness, and on the relationship of sex to politics.

Given the small number of historians who have as yet broached the question of birth control it could be easily assumed that the subject was little discussed in the 1800's. It is true that references to actual contraceptive techniques, even those contained in medical manuals, were usually couched in vague and allusive language. Nevertheless, the general question of the role played by family size in the health and happiness of both the nation and the individual household was a topic that attracted the attention of a host of social observers. In *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, for example, Balzac had Mme de l'Estorade advise Mlle de Chaulieu that to bear more than two children was to condemn beloved beings to a life of misery. A thoughtful husband spared his young wife the responsibility of deciding whether or not to limit the family size; he made the decision himself.[3] But could one ex-

[1]J. Bourgeois-Pichat, "The General Development of the Population of France Since the Eighteenth Century," *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London, 1965), 489; also Hélène Bergues *et al., La prévention des naissances dans la famille* (Paris, 1960).

[2]Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris, 1919), 196. For the purposes of this paper no stringent definition of socialism is necessary; the term "the left" will be used to mean the socialist left.

[3]Honoré de Balzac, *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1869), I, 202.

pect social reformers to be overly interested in the private practices of upper-class women? Contraception was long popularly associated with the world of aristocrats and prostitutes.[4] Two responses can be made to this objection. First, even if birth control were in fact practiced only by the upper classes the historian has to explain why reformers who were otherwise campaigning for full social equality should seek to prevent the lower classes from aping their "betters" in this particular area. Second, though most observers agreed that the upper classes were the first to limit the size of their families and that the practice was then taken up in the late eighteenth century by the bourgeoisie, there were in the earliest writings on the subject references to members of the lower classes following suit. In 1760 Jean-Philippe Dutoit-Mambrini declared in *L'Onanisme* that the poor were also tempted by "defensive measures."[5] Moheau warned his readers in 1778: ". . . already the deadly secrets unknown to every animal but man have reached the countryside; even in the villages nature is deceived."[6] In 1782 Père Féline agreed that onanism was common among both the rich and the poor.[7] So concerned were the French clergy with the extent of the "vice" that in 1816, 1822, and 1823 they asked the Penitentiary how they should deal with it. By the 1850's the use of *coitus interruptus* by artisans had, according to Dr. Mayer, "devenue à notre époque d'un usage presque général."[8] In the latter half of the century even conservative investigators were commenting sympathetically on the terror experienced by those working-class women still subjected to repeated pregnancies.

> Take a worker's wife; she prefers to be beaten than to risk having another child; but as she is the weaker, she often receives at the one and the same time both the beating and the child. The fear of having a child is more frequently than one supposes a cause of discord in the poor households as well as in the wealthy.[9]

By the end of the century working-class women were demanding information on contraceptive measures. One wrote to the economist, Charles Gide,

> Our poor working-class mothers see with terror the ceaseless increase of the number of their children. They cannot raise them. They often lose half of them

[4]M. Guyau, *L'Irréligion de l'avenir* (Paris, 1887), 282. Birth control and contraception will be used to refer to practices to prohibit conception during intercourse; family planning could mean anything from abstinence to infanticide.

[5]J. P. Dutoit-Mambrini, *L'Onanisme ou discours philosophiques et moral sur la luxure artificielle & sur tous les crimes relatifs* (Lausanne, 1760), 60.

[6]Moheau, *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France* (Paris, 1778), II, 102.

[7]Père Féline, *Catéchisme des gens mariés* (Paris, 1880), 9. In *La Terre* 1871), Émile Zola provides perhaps the best known account of a peasant girl demanding her partner to withdraw before ejaculating.

[8]Dr. A. Mayer, *Des rapports conjugaux* (Paris, 1857), 144.

[9]Guyau, *L'Irréligion*, 282–83.

and those left are weak and sickly. They [the mothers] are physically and morally exhausted. The great majority are ignorant of the means employed, it seems, for a long time by the well-to-do classes. . . . What they unfortunately too often do is attempt to remove the beginnings of a pregnancy. They thus injure their health. . . . In order to teach these women already over-burdened with children should we not instruct ourselves *seriously* and *honestly* [*sic*] on preventive measures so as to tell them about such means?[10]

The responses made to such pleas by the Catholic clergy and liberal economists have been documented elsewhere.[11] The Church was hostile to birth control and true to the injunction "Go forth and multiply." The extent of family planning could not, of course, be ignored; confessors were advised to assume that it was the husband's responsibility and to avoid embarrassing questions that might drive women from the Church. In the eighteenth century most French political economists accepted a growing population as a sign of the nation's well-being, but in the first half of the nineteenth century Malthus' disciples won an increasing number of converts to the theory that a stable population was preferable. Such stability was to be attained by the working class prudently postponing marriage. After France's defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871, however, fears were expressed in terms of increasing hysteria that the country's slow population growth was leading to moral and political collapse. The century ended with the clergy and many economists rallying to ward off the threat of depopulation.

What was the attitude of the French left? Its most influential representatives opposed the proposition that population could and should be controlled. Their response was motivated by the following concerns which will be examined in detail: first, that the "population question" was a false issue manufactured by reactionaries to turn attention away from the question of social reform; secondly, that though population could not be controlled, nature or providence would ensure that over-population would not take place; thirdly, that if birth control freed women from their natural duties the relationship of the sexes would be changed and the family undermined; and lastly, that sensual pleasure, which might be increased by the practice of birth control, was not a true measure of happiness and should not be pursued.

To begin with the left's refusal to accept the proposition that there was a "population problem" it is necessary to recall that most

[10]Charles Gide, "Le dépeuplement de la France," *La Revue hebdomadaire*, **19** (May 8, 1909), 143 (the addenda are Gide's).

[11]J. L. Flandrin, *L'Église et le contrôle des naissances* (Paris, 1970); T. Zeldin, "The Conflict of Moralities: Confession, Sin and Pleasure in Nineteenth Century France," *Conflicts in French Society* (London, 1870), 13–51; J. T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); J. J. Spengler, *France Faces Depopulation* (Durham, 1938) and "French Population Theory Since 1800," *Journal of Political Economy*, **44** (1936), 577–631; René Goddard, *Histoire des doctrines de la population* (Paris, 1923); Francesco Nitti, *Population and the Social System* (London, 1894).

eighteenth-century writers believed that population growth was both a cause and an effect of a nation's wealth. Rousseau was stating a commonplace when he declared:

> What is the purpose of political association? It is the preservation and prosperity of its members. And what is the surest sign of their preservation and prosperity? It is their number and population.[12]

Indeed the old argument that the ancient world had been more populous than the modern, and that France was actually underpopulated, was still being raised at the end of the century. Poverty, declared Mably, Morelly, and Rousseau, was not caused by the natural increase of the nation's numbers but by the faults of the existing form of society. Social inequalities could be eliminated by redistributing wealth and providing for all. The *patriotes* carried on this argument into the revolution, attributing what they took to be a declining population to fiscal injustices and ecclesiastical celibacy. François-Noel Babeuf (1760–97), the heir of the Spartan egalitarianism of Rousseau and Mably, who made the first practical attempt at establishing a socialist state, set the line of the nineteenth-century socialists' discussion of population. Population pressure did not pose a problem to existing society; if it were to become one in the future it still could only be considered a secondary issue.

> I believe that even in the case where it was recognized that the means of subsistence of a Nation would not be sufficient to satisfy the appetites of all its members; I believe that then the simple laws of nature command, instead of depopulation, the partial deprivation of each of its members, to satisfy equally, in the usual proportions the needs of all.[13]

Babeuf was addressing himself to a hypothetical case but his concern reflected the spirit of the times; a year after his death in 1798 Malthus published what was to be the most famous study of the problem, *An Essay on the Principles of Population.*

Malthus was not a disinterested observer; he undertook his investigations with the purpose in mind of destroying the egalitarian theories of Godwin and Condorcet. The result of such utopian schemes, declared Malthus, would be that population would soon overshoot the food supply and be overwhelmed by vice and misery. For his contemporaries his most startling revelation, however, was not that food supplies were increasing in arithmetic and population in geometric progressions, but that the major cause of existing poverty was the "reckless overbreeding of the poor."[14] The upper classes in both France and England, slowly

[12] J. J. Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Amsterdam, 1762), 119.

[13] *Du système de dépopulation* (Paris, an III), 35. Though this passage is taken from his response to the reputed Jacobin plot to depopulate France, it is representative of Babeuf's thinking. The association of depopulation with the excesses of the Terror was a theme later popularized by Taine.

[14] *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (London, 1803), 531.

having to relinquish traditional arguments for the maintenance of their privileged status were now provided with modern, scientific justifications. Malthus had proven to their satisfaction that reform was futile.

After Malthus, French liberal economists swung round to the view that an ever-increasing population was not desirable. Writers on the left who quite naturally viewed Malthus as an advocate of the propertied classes, clung to the older opinion that the failure of a nation to grow had to be seen as a sign of decay; such growth could be more than made up for by the increases in productivity provided by organized labor. Saint-Simon (1760–1825), considered as a man of the left to the extent that he was opposed to individualistic capitalism, was true to the spirit of the eighteenth century in declaring population growth the best test of a country's prosperity.[15] His early associate Auguste Comte (1798–1857) described population as the mother of social progress and decried Malthus' argument as a sophistic theory, an amalgam of "irrational exaggerations," an immoral aberration which revealed the antipathy of the wealthy for the poor.[16] Philippe-Michel Buonarroti (1761–1837) who popularized Babeuf's thought in the *Conspiration pour l'égalité* (1828) carried on the master's message that in the egalitarian state everything would "favor the multiplication of the species."[17] In *Voyage en Icarie* (1840) the communist Étienne Babeuf (1788–1856) claimed that in his reformed society the population would be doubled.[18] P. J. Proudhon (1809–65), though critical of every other contemporary socialist, did agree that Malthus was responsible for the propagation of a doctrine that would destroy both the family and the economy:

> . . . the family dies out and with the family property; the economic movement is left unfinished, and society returns to a state of barbarism. Malthus and the moral economists made marriage inaccessible; the physician-economists make it purposeless: both add to the lack of bread the lack of affections, provoke the disintegration of social ties. . . .[19]

The romantic socialist, Pierre Leroux (1797–1871), was of the same opinion; the "population question" was simply another attack launched by liberals on the lower classes.

> After having preached to the poor continence, celibacy, and forbidden marriage before the age of thirty, they have invented what they call *checks* or artificial

[15] Frank E. Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 227–28.

[16] A. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris, 1842), IV, 644ff. Sismonde de Sismondi could be included here as a left-leaning liberal critical of Malthus: *Nouveaux principes d'économie politique* (Paris, 1819), II, 248ff., and *Études sur l'économie politique* (Paris, 1837), I, 130, II, 266ff.

[17] *Conspiration pour l'égalité* (Paris, 1828), I, 120.

[18] *Voyage en Icarie* (Paris, 1842), 121.

[19] *Système des contradictions économiques ou philosophie de la misère* (Paris, 1846), II, 449.

obstacles to population . . . to teach men to satisfy their instincts without obeying the laws of nature, to violate them was a shame reserved for the atheists that are called economists.[20]

In England, wrote Leroux, the same economists, ignorant of both the moral and economic calamities that declining population produced, were going so far as to defend infanticide.[21]

Now it is important to recall that Malthus' famous plea for "moral restraint" was aimed at convincing the poor to postpone marriage as long as possible; the parson did not condone the use of contraception after marriage and was thus in complete opposition to the birth controllers.[22] This nuance in Malthusian thought was overlooked by many of his disciples and critics. Both sides were far more concerned with his major argument that individual self-improvement and social reform were mutually exclusive, antagonistic goals. In adopting this premise the left had no choice but to oppose population control; to accept the social necessity of either contraception or postponed marriage would, it was felt, be tantamount to acknowledging that unemployment and poverty were natural problems to be overcome by individual self-help.

If the left suspected anyone who worried about the population problem of being an enemy of social reform, did this mean that they foresaw the population increasing interminably? This proposition, they recognized, was untenable. They were thus led to elaborate the second theme of their anti-Malthusian argument, that once a socialist society was created the population would be balanced by "natural means."[23] Just as a man stopped growing once he reached maturity, so too the population would cease to increase once society reached some predetermined level of development. A problem arose, however, when the various socialist theorists attempted to explain the means by which benevolent nature would prevent over-population from occurring.

Proudhon condemned contraception and declared that abortion, defended by a certain Dr. G. . . ., was equal to murder. Charles Loudon's theory that population stability could be attained by extending a mother's period of lactation during which she was less fertile (a theory that won Leroux's interest), was also rejected by Proudhon on the grounds that it sprang from a pessimistic appraisal of man's potential.[24]

[20] *Malthus et les économistes* (Paris, 1849), 104–05.

[21] *Ibid.*, 104. Leroux was apparently referring to Marcus, *An Essay on Populousness* (London, 1838), not realizing that it was a Swiftian attack on, not a defense of, infanticide.

[22] Hence Catholics such as De Maistre, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Charles de Coux could argue that celibacy was not harmful and that indeed only Catholicism could provide the "moral restraint" for which Malthus called. J. P. Duroselle, *Les débuts du catholicisme sociale en France, 1822–1870* (Paris, 1951), 40ff.

[23] The socialist's faith in nature mirrored the Catholic's in the Creator; e.g., Père Féline, *Catéchisme*, 41–42.

[24] *Système des contradictions*, II, 453, 456; Charles Loudon, *The Equilibrium of Population and Sustenance Demonstrated* (London, 1836).

Even the rhythm method which involved no artificial checks which could offend the susceptibilities of the natural law advocate, was declared to be morally unacceptable.

With this easy means of playing without paying, and of sinning without being surprised, modesty is no longer but a stupid and troublesome prejudice, marriage a bothersome and useless convention.[25]

It was the very idea that birth control made life easier for man that most enraged Proudhon. Labor was the essential characteristic of the human being; struggle and sacrifice of pleasure produced progress. The limitation of population could thus be viewed only as a sign of moral advance if it was a consequence not of the pursuit of pleasure but of a greater devotion to labor. Proudhon claimed, as had Comte, that the great men of history had led chaste lives while the lazy and poor had been prolific. This was the real law of population.

The industrial faculty exercises itself only at the expense of the prolific faculty. Labor is an active cause of the cooling of love: it is the most powerful of all antiaphrodisiacs, that much more powerful especially as it simultaneously affects the mind and the body.[26]

The argument of the socialist theoretician Louis Blanc (1811–82) was similar to Proudhon's in that it contained the idea that the cultivation of manners, the displacement of the lower appetites by the higher, would have a depressing effect on the birth rate.[27] He declared that natality was simply a reflection of the standard of living; when the latter reached a certain level smaller families became the norm. To support his thesis he presented data drawn from Paris which revealed that the wealthier *arrondissements* had fewer births per family than the poorer.[28] The question was to be asked, however, why England, which was more prosperous than France, continued to have a faster growing population?

The discussion of the natural levelling-off of population even led Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805–81), traditionally portrayed as the cool, calculating revolutionary, into realms of bizarre speculation. He shared Blanc's belief that as the standard of living was raised the birth rate dropped, but he interpreted this phenomenon in a most peculiar fashion. The improvements in public health that would inevitably follow the revolution would result in a preponderance of male births. With fewer women there would be smaller population increases although each

[25] *Système des contradictions*, II, 455.

[26] *Ibid.*, II, 477.

[27] T. Dézamy, *Code de la communauté* (Paris, 1842), 193.

[28] *Organization du travail* (Paris, 1848), 152–53. Blanc came close to saying, as had the conservative Catholic H. A. Frégier, that only the sober artisan would have the self-control necessary to practice *coitus interruptus*. Frégier also made the interesting point that the self-centered artisan who adopted the practice would soon shed the traditional lower class sympathy for unwed mothers and illegitimate children: *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes* (Paris, 1840), I, 326–35.

mother would still bear a large number of children. The *faits connus* on which Blanqui based his theory were drawn from contemporary reports on Tibet.[29] Setting aside the exotic trappings of the argument, it is apparent that Blanqui's response to the birth-control issue was essentially the same as that of most other socialists—a refusal to envisage the direct control of conception as either moral or natural and a faith in providence eventually providing a panacea. The antithesis between the class struggle and individual self-help was reiterated. After the revolution a real solution to the population problem would be provided not just for calculating individuals but for all.[30]

The third theme of the French left's argument against birth control was that it was immoral inasmuch as the practice violated not divine, but natural laws. By freeing women from their natural duties and responsibilities it frustrated the purposes of the family and threatened society at large. Here again nineteenth-century social theorists were following their eighteenth-century forebears. The *philosophes* had sought not to tear down but to build up society on surer foundations. Though they criticized ethics based on religious values they insisted that their natural morality would provide a guarantee of public order. The family, in the eyes of such men, was the source of all social cohesion, a natural entity that had to be buttressed, not undermined. Morelly, for example, believed that by marrying and having children a man provided evidence of his interest in the well-being of the community and therefore, in his *Code de la nature* (1755), marriage was made obligatory.[31] It was due to this concern for the family unit that the *philosophes* who, save for Condorcet, were otherwise little interested in women, felt forced to devote some attention to the role of wife and mother. There was always the danger, warned Rousseau, that the weaker sex, in giving in to its natural penchant for indolence and licentiousness by refraining from having children, could undermine both the family and the state.

> Since the state of motherhood is onerous, one soon finds the means of avoiding it altogether; one wishes to do a useless task [i.e., have sex but avoid conception] in order to continually redo it, and to the detriment of the species is turned the attraction given in order to multiply it.[32]

Similarly, Babeuf viewed women with their more passionate natures as a threat to the communist society he envisaged in which happiness would not be found in sensual pleasure but in hard work.[33] Future

[29] *Critique sociale* (Paris, 1885), I, 143–44.

[30] For similar arguments on food and falling birth rates see Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau monde industriel*, in *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1841–45), VI, 337ff., and from the other side of the channel, Thomas Doubleday. *The True Law of Population* (London, 1842), 275.

[31] *Code de la nature* (Paris, 1910), 99.

[32] *Émile ou de l'éducation*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1971), III, 25.

[33] Cited by Buonarroti, *Système politique* (Paris, 1842), 49–50. Babeuf was given to the use of Samson and Delilah imagery.

harmony, he declared, would depend on limiting their education, maintaining their domestic subordination, and dulling their senses by manual labor. According to Buonarroti, however, women's work was not to interfere with their primary function: "The man, destined by nature to [a life of] movement and action, must feed and defend the country; the woman must give it vigorous citizens."[34] Cabet was working towards the same sort of state in which marriage and fidelity would be civic duties. Celibacy and adultery were to be crimes in Icarie; the moral control of the community would in addition preclude youth from having any "secrets." Cabet, instead of discussing birth control presented a plan for both the doubling of the population and the breeding of a super race. Woman was not to be freed from child-bearing; she was to be subjected to the dictates of a *Commission de perfectionnement.*[35]

A radical change in the appreciation of women has been credited by a number of historians to Saint-Simon and his progeny.[36] Saint-Simon himself showed little real interest in improving the status of women. His follower, Barthélemy-Prosper Enfantin (1796–1864) preached the "rehabilitation of the flesh," but it is difficult to determine what his heralded emancipation of women meant in practical terms.[37] In theory he broke down the old laws of matrimony; in practice he and his followers attempted to prove their higher morality by leading an ascetic life at Menilmontant. Enfantin, his time taken up as it was by the more serious business of searching for the Woman Messiah, had no time for such mundane problems as birth control and does not seem to have considered the population problem. Far from freeing woman, he envisaged subjecting both sexes to the theocratic rule of the *Mère* and *Père.*

Enfantin's religious mysticism represented one aspect of Saint-Simon's patrimony; Auguste Comte's positivism another.[38] The Church had presented woman as primarily a propagator of the species; Comte declared that her essential vocation was that of wife. This was hardly emancipation. Wife and husband were not equal; man was superior in force, woman in affection. Comte condemned the "subversive dreams"

[34] *Conspiration pour l'égalité,* I, 282–83.

[35] *Voyage en Icarie,* 140, 122. On the idea of systematic procreation reserved for the best physical and intellectual specimens, cf. Comte, *Système de politique positive* (Paris, 1851), IV, 278.

[36] E.g., George Lichtheim, *The Origins of Socialism* (London, 1969), 244; F. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 157.

[37] S. Charléty, *Enfantin* (Paris, 1930); Michel Chevalier, ed., *Religion saint-simonienne* (Paris, 1832), 176–81; Mme de Casamajor (Émile Barrault), *Pathologie du mariage* (Paris, 1847).

[38] Comte was basically a conservative but deserves attention here because many of his ideas were shared by writers on the left. The fourth part of volume one of *Système de politique positive* was devoted to the *Influence féminine du positivisme;* see also L. M. Ferré, *Féminisme et positivisme* (Paris, 1938).

of the feminists and restricted the wife to her "august domestic vocations." Seclusion was necessary because men and women could only be friends if they could not be competitors. The woman, wrote Comte, was to renounce all power and become the priestess of humanity, representing by her abnegation the subordination of politics to morality.

In Comte's writings one finds the same puritanical streak noted earlier in Babeuf and Cabet. Marriage was for Comte the basic relationship of society and accordingly had to be monogamous and indissoluble. The purpose of the marriage was to purge the couple's love of all base passions. Though Comte loathed Malthus, he downplayed the woman's role as child bearer. Sexual desire was, he admitted, necessary to first bring the couple together, but from that point onward this instinct was to be subjected to a "constant and severe discipline" leading to "conjugal chastity."[39]

A remarkably similar aversion to sexuality is found in the works of Proudhon who brought together all the misogynist arguments of the century. Woman, in his eyes, was inferior to man physically, intellectually, and morally, and existed somewhere between him and the animal world.[40] Once her child-bearing function was completed she lost even this position and became a *sorte de métis*.[41] Men and women were, he declared, two distinct species who could form no true society. The only time they came together was during sexual intercourse—an unfortunate duty required for the continuation of the species. It was during these brief encounters, however, that man ran the danger of falling completely under the sway of woman and the sensual desires she incarnated. He was only saved from this fate by the fact that nature had condemned woman to pay a terrible physical price for her brutish lusts.

> Man, with his force, his will, his courage, his intelligence, daily falling into the amorous traps of the woman, would never succeed in taming her and making himself master if he were not aided by the maladies and infirmities which beat down this lioness: pregnancies, births, nursings, then all the diseases which follow and permit the man, in withdrawing from the common bed to catch his breath and become himself again, while the woman, beaten down by suffering, is constrained to bow and humble herself; there is the source of domestic peace.[42]

Michelet had also described the woman as a permanent invalid;[43] what he did not appreciate, declared Proudhon, was that only by her physical

[39]*Système de politique positive*, I, 210ff.; IV, 68–69, 276–78. The climax of this process was, logically enough, virgin birth. Polygamy had been displaced by monogamy; now maternity was to be reconciled with virginity! *Ibid.*, IV, 69, 278.

[40]*De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* (Paris, 1858), III, 375ff.

[41]*La pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1875), 181.

[42]*Ibid.*, 262–63. On the fear of female licentiousness cf. Alphonse Exquiros, *Paris ou les sciences, les institutions et les moeurs au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1847), II, 355.

[43]Jules Michelet, *L'Amour* (Paris, 1889), 52ff.

incapacitation could man be free. Her passions had to be bridled by physical suffering if the family was to play its role of providing the dignity, pious calm, and moral sentiment previously furnished by religion. Birth control, which provided the woman with a way of avoiding the consequences of her concupiscence, was thus necessarily viewed by Proudhon as posing the gravest possible threat to the social order.

> Pornocracy [Proudhon's term for female emancipation] and Malthusianism must go together. They appeal to one another, they join, unite, harmonize, as cause and effect. One asks that no more children be produced and the other teaches how to have no more than: Polyandry for women. Polygamy for men. Promiscuity for all.[44]

Proudhon was the one major figure on the French left to win a reputation as an unabashed misogynist. It has been assumed by historians that aside from this renegade all nineteenth-century socialists can be classified as feminists to the extent that they envisaged a better future for women.[45] But it was this tendency of the utopian socialists to discuss the state of motherhood only as it would be after the ultimate social transformation that often blinded them to the very real problems posed by child-bearing to nineteenth-century women. The chilling description of the plight of the working-class mother in the fourierist François Vidal's (1812–72) *De la répartition de la richesse* (1846), provides a useful corrective to contemporary effusions on the joys of motherhood.

> The towers [of the foundling homes] have been closed, and the poor mother, the working-class girl, has been left no other option than abortion or infanticide. In our bleak society many mothers have cursed their fecundity, and more than one, in thinking of the future which awaits her new-born child, has broken its head against the cobbles, or strangled it with maternal hands, in order *to deliver it from life,* to spare it misery, suffering, to save it from prostitution. Happy those children of the working class who die in the cradle! Happy the sterile woman! Happy the man with no family![46]

But even Vidal, who bitterly portrayed the burden of motherhood in the somberest of tones, did not suggest that an answer was provided by birth control. He too believed that there was only one way to prevent the horrible act of infanticide and that was by the wholesale changing of society. His unstated assumption, shared by most other socialists, was that if society provided the necessary means of support women could be expected to accept pregnancy after pregnancy without complaint.

[44] *La pornocratie,* 227.

[45] But see Marguerite Thibert, *Le féminisme dans le socialisme français de 1830 à 1850* (Paris, 1926).

[46] *De la répartition de la richesse* (Paris, 1846), 285; Ernest Legouvé, *Histoire morale des femmes* (Paris, 1849), 332.

The fact that many writers on the left denied that the sensual pleasure of either the woman or the man could be taken as a true measure of happiness was a final reason for their rejection of birth control. At bottom these writers shared the traditional moralists' pessimistic conception of man. Like them they believed that social cohesion could only be attained by the individual's sacrifice of pleasure. Man had to choose either the frugality and simplicity of the ascetic or the decadence and degeneration of the sensualist.[47]

The consequences of the sexual over-indulgence which contraceptive practices would permit included both physical and moral debility. As the following passage from Leroux makes clear, it was assumed that to free sexual gratification from the consequences of conception would inevitably lead to debauchery.

> Do they imagine that they can create, as they counsel, *checks* on the population, without burdening Humanity with evils of all sorts, without afflicting it with every vice, without imposing on it every type of impurity, without making human life an eternal hell![48]

These "checks" would permit promiscuous liaisons before marriage to go undetected and allow sexual excesses after. The doctors P. J. B. Buchez (1796–1865) and U. Trélat (1795–1879), in the midst of their participation in the Carbonari and Saint-Simonian movements, warned the young man: "But if on the contrary he delivers himself to hasty pleasures, he will ruin his constitution, will remain sickly and weak, lose his memory, his will, will use up his life in a few moments."[49] Sexual excess within marriage was defined by the authors as anything more than twice weekly intercourse. Moreover it was the man's responsibility to protect the physical and moral health of the family; one could not expect wives to have such foresight. "Coition is infinitely less tiring for them than for the man, they can repeat it with impunity. . . ."[50] Women were more sensitive but less sensible creatures, wholly dominated by their sexual desires and therefore a real threat to their husbands' welfare.

The question of preserving one's physical health was only a secondary consideration; the moral consequences of the sensual excesses permitted by birth control were the socialists' real concern. Proudhon was sounding a familiar chord when he declared that it was by shunning pleasure and devoting himself to work that man demonstrated his humanity.

[47] Saint-Simon's statement that the happy man was the working man typified this outlook: *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du XIX^e siècle*, in *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1839), I, 220ff.

[48] *Malthus et les économistes*, 183. Proudhon declared: "*Onanism* has as its corollary *beastiality*. It's curious; conjugal onanism has been proposed by the defenders of human exploitation in order to serve as a brake on the population: as if the beastiality of economics was sanctioned by the beastiality of love." *De la justice*, III, 485.

[49] *Précis élémentaire d'hygiène* (Paris, 1825), 219.

[50] *Ibid.*, 220.

This antagonism of the physical and moral in man, in the exercise of his industrial and prolific faculties, is the balance wheel of the social machine. Man, in his development, moves ceaselessly from fatality to liberty, from instinct to reason, from matter to spirit. It is by virtue of this progress that he frees himself little by little from the slavery of the senses, as from the oppression of painful and repulsive labors.[51]

Man had to flee "the tyranny of the organs" and seek in marriage a chaste love that would vanquish the passions. Proudhon was in effect saying that the coming of a reformed society would entail as much a moral as an economic and political revolution. "Either humanity must become by labor a society of saints, or by monopoly and misery civilization is only a vast orgy."[52]

Half a century later Georges Sorel (1847–1922) was voicing the same sentiments. He hailed Proudhon as the defender of morality based on family and sexual relations; he ridiculed the feminist programs of Fourier and Bebel. Yet Sorel recognized that women were not happy with their lot.

But it is necessary never to forget that the woman is the great regulator of birth and that everywhere, as soon as she is no longer raised in the superstitious respect of the force of the male, she demands the right of not being transformed into a reproductive animal.[53]

The problem, as Sorel saw it, was how to relieve women of this burden without releasing the destructive forces of sexuality. Like Comte he insisted that the woman not be dragged down to the man's level by giving her rights to *caprices amoureux*. Like Proudhon he insisted that the answer was to be found in greater chastity for all: "We can affirm that *the world will become more just only to the extent that it becomes more chaste;* I do not believe that there is a more certain truth."[54]

Given the lack of sympathy with which the leading socialists viewed the question of birth control it comes as somewhat of a surprise to find that when the practice finally found public apologists in the last decades of the nineteenth century they were on the left. But these later writers were not in the mainstream of French socialism; they were on its liberal and anarchistic fringes. Moreover they could only look back to a handful of thinkers who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provided the basis for the neo-Malthusian movement. Malthus had been jolted into writing *An Essay on the Principles of Population* by Condorcet. Referring to the Frenchman's prediction that in the future man would control his reproduction, Malthus declared:

[51] *Système de contradictions*, II, 480. [52] *Ibid.*, II, 496.

[53] *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat* (Paris, 1919), 198.

[54] *Ibid.*, 199. Compare Babeuf's statement of a hundred years previous: "Les moeurs étant les garantes des Républiques parce que celles-ci basent sur les vertus, c'est des institutions morales que dépend la perfection ou la perversion de l'esprit républicain." *Le Tribune du peuple*, **28** (Paris, n.d.), 240.

He then proceeds to remove the difficulty of over-population in a manner, which I profess not to understand. Having observed, that the ridiculous prejudices of superstition would by that time have ceased to throw over morals a corrupt and degrading austerity he alludes, either to a promiscuous concubinage, which would prevent breeding or to something else as unnatural. To remove the difficulty in this way, will, surely, in the opinion of most men, be, to destroy that virtue and purity of manners, which the advocates of equality, and of the perfectibility of man, profess to be the end and object of their views.[55]

Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–94) had in fact set the line of argument in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794) which was to be followed by later birth control advocates. He wrote that soon

. . . men will then know that, if they have obligations to those beings who are not yet here, it consists not of bringing them into existence, but of making them happy; they have for their purpose the general well-being of the human species or of the society in which they live; of the family to which they are attached, and not the childish idea of burdening the world with useless and unfortunate beings.[56]

Condorcet had been one of the few *philosophes* to subject both the status of women and the family to critical examination. He was not satisfied that either had been predetermined by nature to continue in its present form and he thus had no qualms when it came to questioning the value of population growth as a sign of public prosperity. The same question was asked by Sénancour (1770–1846) in *De l'amour* (1806).

In Europe a quarter of the population cannot escape its abject poverty. It is true that this distress is not directly produced by the lack of space, and that foodstuffs are not wanting; but will the increasing of the population reform the habits which are to a large part a result of the number of men collected together under a single ruler?[57]

Condorcet and Sénancour did not suggest that population control would solve every problem; they simply stated that the individual had a right to contraception. More importantly they were insisting that the woman had the right to control her own body.

The sex which forms and feeds has cares to fulfil; often it wishes to avoid them, often it even must. It is the sex which receives the action which has the right of refusing it. . . . Men finding no danger here for themselves, easily forget what harm is done in making pregnant a woman who cannot want it. They cannot ignore how odious such indifference is, and all that there is contemptible in this brutal abandonment. But what they almost all seem to ignore is that even in the unions sanctioned by the law, it is imprudent, blameworthy, senseless, to have as many children as chance in some way produces.[58]

[55] *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (London, 1798), 154.

[56] *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, ed. O. H. Prior (Paris, 1933), 222–23.

[57] *De l'amour* (Paris, 1834, 3rd edit.), I, 332.

[58] *De l'amour* (Paris, 1808, 2nd edit.), 41, 146.

Condorcet and Sénancour accepted the notion that pleasure was an obvious measure of happiness and that women had as much right to pleasure as men.[59] In contrast to those who called for the repression of the passions they optimistically held that, once freed of the trammels of family and society, the free expression of human needs could only lead to good.

The most famous defender of such liberty in the nineteenth century was Charles Fourier (1772–1837). Indeed, he believed that through the very operation of such freedoms his *état sociétaire* would enjoy a stable population. He was frequently attacked for promulgating contraceptive theories, but in fact he was hopelessly utopian when it came to the problem of assuring a low birth rate.[60] He hoped that women would become less prolific due to greater activity, a *régime gastrosophique, moeurs phanérogames,* and *exercise intégral.*[61] Moreover he declared that the changes he envisaged would not come into force until at least a generation after the founding of harmony.[62] Contemporaries were not taken in by these reservations. They recognized that Fourier was clearly advancing a line of thought that defended the right of birth control. He was a resolute critic of the family which served to oppress both the woman and the child. He was a feminist but his feminism, unlike that of his contemporaries, did not consist of seeking to restrict men to the chaste condition heretofore demanded of women. Instead of calling for mortification of the flesh and holding in check sexual feelings, he gloried in their free expression.[63]

Fourier's critique of the family was to have a marked influence on those French socialists later associated with Marx. The "scientific socialists" avoided the pious moralizing of the utopians while skirting the question of the woman's right to avoid pregnancy.[64] It would appear that

[59]Sénancour specifically defended the unmarried woman's right to contraception: *De l'amour* (1808), 145; (1834), I, 245.

[60]For denunciations of Fourier: Proudhon, *Système des contradictions,* II, 451–55 and Sorel, *Matériaux d'une théorie,* 196.

[61]*Le nouveau monde industriel,* in *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1841–45), VI, 337ff. Moreover Fourier believed that the land could support a larger population if organized in horticultural communities; he drew support for his argument from M. Herrenschwand, *De l'économie politique moderne: discours fondamental sur la population* (London, 1786).

[62]*Duperies des détracteurs; Secte Owen,* in *Oeuvres,* VI, 154–55.

[63]*Le nouveaux monde amoureux,* in *Théorie des quatres mouvements et des destinées générales* (Paris, 1967), 245–314. Fourier's followers tended to downplay his interest in sex; e.g., Victor Hennequin, *Les amours au phalanstère* (Paris, 1849). It is of interest to note, however, that Dr. A. Mayer, one of the first doctors to publicly defend contraception hailed Fourier as *"un grand génie moderne" (Des rapports conjugaux,* 106).

[64]E.g., Constantin Pecqueur, *Théorie nouvelle d'économie sociale et politique* (Paris, 1842), 325; Jules Guesde, *Essai de catéchisme socialiste* (Paris, 1878), 72–79, 93–98; Paul Lafargue, *La question de la femme* (Paris, 1904), 22–24; D. E. C. Eversley, *Social Theories of Fertility and the Malthusian Debate* (Oxford, 1959); R. L. Meek, *Marx and Engels on Malthus* (London, 1953).

in the face of the wide-scale family-planning from the 1860's onwards, socialists felt it was prudent to avoid the issue. Nevertheless, it was still tacitly understood that as far as the traditional left was concerned, to espouse the social necessity of contraception was to acknowledge that the plight of the masses was to be solved, not by class struggle but by individual self-help. Robert Hertz wrote:

> Of course, if it pleases a proletarian family to improve its situation in having no children, they are free [to do so]: it is a personal affair which is their business. But in remaining sterile they have no more contributed to the emancipation of their class than a worker who becomes a wine merchant has abolished wage-earning. . . .[65]

If the working class as a whole adopted such practices the results would be an *amoindrissement national,* a rise in unemployment as the number of consumers fell, and a decline of the socialist population relative to the hoards of prolific *barbares,* i.e., Catholics and foreign laborers. The working-class family which had only one child would not produce a socialist militant; "il fera le plus souvent un petit bourgeois bien sage ou un arriviste médiocre."[66]

A number of anarchists were prepared, however, by the last decades of the century to espouse neo-Malthusianism as a weapon in the class war. Paul Robin (1837–1912), nominated to the General Council of the International in 1871 and later expelled for his support of the Jurassiens, defended the tactic in *La question sexuelle* (1878). He failed to win the support of the better known anarchists such as James Guillaume and Peter Kropotkin, but by the end of the century had a small following which included Nelly Roussel, Sébastien Faure, Eugène Humbert, and Manuel Devaldès.[67]

The line of argument of the neo-Malthusian anarchists was that *liberté de maternité* was a basic right that could not be denied to any woman in any society. To proclaim such a right would not postpone the revolution but advance it. Only a sadist could welcome an increase in the number of miserable children and ill mothers as a harbinger of revolution. What the socialist cause needed were healthier, more intelligent workers which only smaller families could produce. If any doubts were had as to the revolutionary potential of the neo-Malthusian tactic it was only necessary to ask who were in favor of workers having large families—it was the capitalists, patriots, priests, and generals.[68]

[65] *Socialisme et dépopulation; Les Cahiers du Socialiste,* no. 10 (Paris, 1910), 16.

[66] *Ibid.,* 14. For a review of Hertz see *Revue socialiste,* **53** (1911), 475–76; also Désiré Descamps, "Le problème de la dépopulation," *Revue socialiste,* **24** (1896), 257–85; André Armengaud, "Mouvement ouvrier et néo-malthusianisme au début du XX^{e} siècle," *Annales de démographie historique* (1966), 7–21.

[67] Gabriel Giroud, *Paul Robin* (Paris, 1937); R. H. Guerrand, *La libre maternité, 1896–1969* (Paris, 1971); Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France 1880–1914* (Paris, 1951), 319–24.

[68] E.g., Sébastien Faure, *Le problème de la population* (Paris, 1908), and G. Hardy (Gabriel Giroud), *La loi de Malthus* (Paris, 1909).

Contraception was, as the titles of the neo-Malthusian anarchists' works made clear—*La grève des ventres, La chair à canon, Croître et multiplier, c'est la guerre*—the ultimate form of the general strike.

The neo-Malthusians were to form only a small radical fringe of the French socialist movement, and their activities cannot be fully documented here. The purpose of this paper has been rather to ask why the major writers on the left attacked the idea of birth control as unnatural, immoral, and impolitic. The first point to be made is that they were not alone in their inadequate dealing with the question of contraception. Alfred Naquet (1834–1916), the "father of divorce," was referring to every political following when he asked in 1901 why, despite the fact that birth control was practiced on such a wide scale, no one dared to defend it.[69] The socialists' writings on the subject were, of course, prescriptive, not descriptive. It is difficult to determine when authors were seriously condemning specific practices and when they were striking moralistic poses. Even Paris doctors, whose families in the 1890's averaged, one authority informs us, 1.5 children, were extremely circumspect when it came to discussing birth control in public. Their references to the practice were more often designed to alarm than to enlighten: "L'onanisme conjugal, fléau plus cruel, plus meutrier, plus épouvantable que le typhus, la peste et le choléra réunis. . . ."[70]

Though the decline of the birth rate was noted with anxiety from the 1850's by a host of social observers. there were few who chose to regard it as a consequence of simple family planning. Most attributed the decline to whatever aspect of contemporary society they considered most noxious and therefore most likely to result in sterility. The list included conscription, capitalism, clerical celibacy, urbanization, secularization, taxation, equal inheritance, Free Masonry, overeating, bicycling, alcoholism, absinthe, tobacco, and both the emancipation and subjugation of women.[71] A propos of women, it should be noted that those female writers who were campaigning for social and political equality tended to approach the question of birth control in the familiar moralizing fashion. Political freedoms would not, it was promised, be translated into sexual liberties. "To emancipate the woman," wrote Jenny P. d'Héricourt (d. 1875), "is not to recognize her right of using and abusing love. . . ."[72] Indeed the feminists stressed the idea that the liberated woman could

[69] *L'Humanité et la patrie* (Paris, 1901), 243.

[70] Dr. Picon, *Aperçu sur les principales causes de la dépopulation* (Paris, 1888), 9. The information on the size of doctors' families is provided by Dr. Minime (Dr. Lutaud), *Le néo-Malthusianisme* (Paris, 1891), 14.

[71] E.g., L. F. E. Bergeret, *Des fraudes dans l'accomplissement des fonctions génératrices* (Paris, 1868); Raoul Frary, *Le péril national* (Paris, 1881); Arsène Dumont, *Dépopulation et civilization* (Paris, 1890); Auguste Laine, *De la dépopulation en France* (Paris, 1891); Camille Rabaud, *Le péril national ou la dépopulation croissante de la France* (Paris, 1891); Dr. E. Maurel, *De la dépopulation de la France* (Paris, 1896); Edme Piot, *La dépopulation* (Paris, 1902).

[72] *La femme affranchie* (Paris, 1860), I, 5–6; II, 106.

help the man stifle his animalistic appetites. The woman, according to Juliette Lambert (1836–1936), was by nature less motivated by sexual desires and sooner and more completely freed of them. The more active the role she played in family and public life the sooner love would be subordinated to reason and justice, the sooner the beastly side would be overcome.[73]

But to explain the response of the left to the challenge of birth control it is not sufficient to state simply that they shared the prudishness of their contemporaries. Equally important was their sensitivity to the conservative's charge that they were propagating immoral doctrines. The vociferousness with which socialists insisted on their moral superiority suggests that many felt constrained to buttress moral norms in order to compensate for their social critiques. They were so concerned to prove that their economic reforms would not lead, as their opponents claimed, to social disintegration that they defended the patriarchal family, reiterated the subordination of women, and condemned any change in the relationship of the sexes as unnatural. Proclaiming, as had traditional moralists, that social cohesion was achieved by the individual's sacrifice of pleasure it followed that they could view birth control as a highly individualistic act prompted by self-interest and contempt for the community.

In 1896 the economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu said of the neo-Malthusians: "La propagande de ceux-ci est, d'ailleurs, bien inutile; nombre de familles devancent leurs leçons par instinct."[74] If it is true, as Leroy-Beaulieu and later commentators have suggested, that the neo-Malthusians and anti-Malthusians were equally ineffectual in influencing the acceptance of contraception does this mean that their debate was meaningless?[75] It has been the purpose of this paper to show that the controversy is of particular interest inasmuch as it provides a way of setting aside the time-honored superficial political antagonisms and of isolating the more basic but less frequently acknowledged common concerns of nineteenth-century Frenchmen. The left did not break with traditional Judeo-Christian morality. Only a few writers were to declare that sexual and political repression were related; an even smaller number accepted the notion that the freedom of women to control their own bodies was an essential liberty. The subject of "sexual politics" had been broached; the full debate was to await later generations.

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[73] *Idées anti-proudhoniennes sur l'amour, la femme et le mariage* (Paris, 1858), 106.

[74] Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *Traité théorique et pratique d'économie politique* (Paris, 1896), IV, 617.

[75] Hertz, *Socialisme et dépopulation*, 17; Armengaud, "Mouvement ouvrier," 7–21.